

# From Russia With Lust: The Sadomasochistic (Homo)Erotics of Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico

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In 1929, Josef Stalin asked Sergei Eisenstein to travel to Los Angeles to familiarize himself with Hollywood's latest sound film technology. Internationally renowned for his 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* and *October* of 1928, Eisenstein was tasked with imparting the knowledge gained during his technical training to his fellow countrymen. Eisenstein had befriended Hollywood royalty Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford during their 1926 visit to Moscow. His ongoing relationship with the American celebrities enabled him to procure a \$100,000 contract with their studio--Paramount Pictures.

Arriving in the United States in May of 1930, Eisenstein spent more than six months negotiating a number of potential projects with the studio. Paramount players were uneasy about the filmmaker's socialist class politics as well as his stubborn insistence upon casting non-professional actors. These disagreements led the studio to void his contract. As a result he traveled south, deciding to capitalize upon his lifelong interest in Mexican culture. In addition to designing sets and costumes for a 1921 *Proletkult* production of a Jack London short story "The Mexican" (1911), Eisenstein met the muralist Diego Rivera who regaled him with information about Mexican art and culture during his 1927 visit to Moscow. With the financial backing of American author and committed socialist Upton Sinclair, who retained exclusive ownership of the

footage, Eisenstein planned a "film symphony" focused on tracing the nation's evolution from the Mayan age to the post-revolutionary present (Robertson).

Though Eisenstein ultimately shot over two hundred thousand feet of film, Sinclair cut off all funds, seized the footage and sold it off piecemeal. Bitter over what he perceived to be Sinclair's theft of his film, Eisenstein referred to his Mexican footage as "his lost child" (Murray). Upon his death, Sinclair left the remaining footage to New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Eventually MOMA worked out a swap with Russia's *Gosfilmofund* of the Eisenstein footage for several archival films (Salazkina 02). As a result of this exchange in 1979, Grigori Alexandrov, Eisenstein's assistant director, assembled the footage that became *¡Que Viva Mexico!* in accordance with the body of notes left behind by the filmmaker.

Eisenstein biographers and scholars note that Mexico catalyzed a shift in his aesthetic philosophy. During that year, he moved away from his earlier theories of intellectual montage toward a focus on manipulating viewers into a state of ecstasy through sensory stimulus (Murray). The theoretical underpinnings of Eisenstein's Mexican footage are best characterized as a blend of ethnography and his personal interpretation of psychoanalytic theory. The filmmaker was profoundly inspired

by Freud's theories of fetal gestation as a period of undifferentiated pre-logical bliss and humans' innate bisexual predisposition. In his writings, Eisenstein describes the Mexican film as a vehicle through which to explore his sense of himself as bisexed and bisexual as well as a tool for stimulating "pre-logical" ecstasy for viewers (Salazkina 35).<sup>1</sup> In Mexico, Eisenstein was inspired to re-embrace drawing, a practice that he engaged in from childhood through his twenties. Indeed, his vision for *¡Que Viva Mexico!* appears to be profoundly intertwined with the body of drawings he produced while in the country. In his unpublished tome *Method* (1932-1948), Eisenstein characterizes his drawings as a hybrid of "primitive bacchanalian and intellectual abstract" (Eisenstein cited in Neuberger 12). He notes that his Surrealist inspired automatic drawing is rooted in "intimate and emotional states" which he associates with both undifferentiated subjectivity and "medieval monk sex maniacs and mystics" (ibid). Eisenstein goes on to describe the connection between these two states as well as between religious and sexual ecstasy as a "bisexual line" that links the "crudest animal" aspects of his drawings with their refined formalism (ibid).

Mirroring imperialist and Orientalist suppositions, Eisenstein perceived Mexico and more specifically the country's indigenous peoples, as beholden to an essential propensity for pre-logical sensorial ecstasy. In addition to drawing a Freudian parallel between non-Western countries and primal civilizations, Eisenstein genders Mexico feminine; imagining the country as an extension of his female self. In his writings he suggests that he discovered and unleashed long suppressed aspects of himself during this period. He observes, "When I met Mexico she showed herself in all her contradictions as though she were a projection of all the various traits and features which I...carry with me—a knot of complexes" (Eisenstein *Beyond* 418). He goes

on to add "it was not that my consciousness and emotions absorbed the blood and sand of the gory *corrida* [bull fight], the heady sensuality of the tropics, the ascetism of the flagellant monks, the purple and gold of Catholicism or even the cosmic timelessness of the Aztec pyramids: on the contrary, the whole complex of emotions that characterize me extended infinitely beyond me to become an entire vast country" (ibid 414).

Eisenstein's commentary resonates with nineteenth-century British explorer Richard Burton's treatise on "sotadic zones" in his "Terminal Essay" published as an addendum to his 1885 translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Burton coined this term to describe what he perceived to be a predisposition on the part of people living in tropical climates toward inter-generational sodomy. Like Burton, Eisenstein experiences a sadomasochistically inflected homoerotic sexual awakening—an arousal inextricably intertwined with his exoticizing theories of primal tropical sensuality—in foreign climes. The filmmaker cannibalizes or incorporates Mexico as his feminine doppelgänger while also narcissistically projecting himself across the land. In this way he affects a kind of mental colonization that demands we understand his Mexican footage as a filmic self-portrait. Indeed, Eisenstein entitles one of the many drawings he completed in Mexico "*Yo—AutoRitratto Nuevo Laredo*" or "Me—Self-Portrait Nuevo Laredo." In the sketch, he depicts the left half of his body as male and the right half as female. This bi-sexed two headed being

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<sup>1</sup>In *Immortal Memories: An Autobiography* by Eisenstein, the filmmaker observes, "it is here in *tierra caliente* [burning earth] that I come to know the fantastic structure of prelogical, sensuous thinking—not only from the pages of anthropological investigations, but from daily communion with those descendants of the Aztecs, Toltecs, Mayas or Huichole who have managed to carry unharmed through the ages that meandering thought" (211).

kisses him/herself in the center of the frame. To the left, a bleeding Christ hangs from a cross. To the right of the hermaphroditic figure, a nude *Virgen de Guadalupe* drops a bloody tear from her right hand into the red heart she holds in her left hand. The outline of a cloud floats horizontally around her pelvis. At the bottom edge of the frame, Eisenstein draws a prostrate hooded corpse bleeding from the mouth.

Eisenstein conflates Catholic imagery with Freud's theories of pre-Oedipality. He represents himself as bisexed, polymorphously perverse infant situated between the seemingly masochistic son of God and his weeping virginal mother. According to Freud, prior to successful gender interpellation, young children harbor erotic and violent impulses toward their parents. In this image, Eisenstein appears to suggest Christ and Virgin Mary are his progenitors. The corpse may represent Oedipal sexual competition with the father for access to the body of the mother.

In both his Mexican film footage and drawings, Eisenstein presents the bullfight as a visual analogy for his personal and aesthetic pursuit of pre logical ecstasy. In his insistence that "it was not that my consciousness and emotions absorbed the blood and sand of the gory *corrida*" Eisenstein draws a distinction between the boundaries demarcating his physical and spiritual body from the abject effluvia of the bullfight. However, he obsessively returns to scenes of penetrated, bleeding and eroticized masculine bodies with all of their religious connotations. Using the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, patron saint of Mexico and bullfighting, as a visual and thematic bridging device, Eisenstein blurs boundaries between the crucifixion of Christ, the penetration of St. Sebastian and the slow slaughter of the bull by *picador* and *toreador*. Images of the nude and wounded torsos of Christ and Sebastian

suggest a correlation with woman as the bearer of the bleeding wound since their bodies like that of heterosexual women have been penetrated by men. The Catholic ritual of communion provides an apt correlate for Eisenstein's conflation of sadomasochistic penetration and cannibalism with religious and sexual ecstasy. Eisenstein entitled a 1931 Mexican drawing "*Le légende de la maison*" or "A Legend About Home" in deference to Freud's correlation of the uncanny with a paradoxical desire to and fear of returning to the maternal womb or the originary home in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." In the image, a Christ-like figure hangs from a cross, a utilitarian faucet installed inside his gaping torso wound. Blood pours from the faucet into a bathtub in which a man scrubs himself with a loofah. Here Christ's bleeding torso becomes akin to the breaking waters of a woman's womb. However, rather than an infant emerging from its mother's body, a grown man cleanses himself with the deathly effluvia of a male body rather than of maternal child bearing. The tub in which he sits has sprung a leak and an androgynous prostrate figure attempts to catch some of the leaking substance in a perfume bottle. The two figures by the tub evoke the figure of Hungarian Countess Elisabeth Bathory who bathed in the blood of female virgins in an attempt to maintain her youth. However, the image also implies that Catholic communion is rooted in a kind of sexualized blood lust. Oral incorporation of bodily fluids evokes not only the specter of cannibalism but also sexual engulfment.

In line with Freud's theory of the uncanny as an alternately blissful or terrifying return to the womb, Melanie Klein argues that pre-Oedipal infants experience a violent erotic impulse to ingest the mother's breast. Likewise, they simultaneously harbor a desire to penetrate and eviscerate her womb in order to gain access to the penis and children they imagine she hides within (Klein 92). Notably

the *campesinos* of the “*Maguey*” episode in *¡Que Viva Mexico!* are employed to suck and spit out the milky juice from the aforementioned plants in order to make the ancient Aztec alcoholic concoction *pulque*. The shots of the young Mayan men at work evoke scenes of breastfeeding. In the sequences presenting the wealthy landowners enjoying the fruits of the *campesinos*’ labor, Eisenstein depicts the *hacendados* or landowners drooling the viscous substance out of their lips onto their mustaches. In correlating the *maguey* juice with breast milk in the scenes featuring the *campesinos* Eisenstein codes them as innocent breastfeeding infants. However, in depicting *pulque* as a semen equivalent with regard to the landowning class he associates them with fellatio—a verboten (homo)sexual practice that appears with frequency in Eisenstein’s Mexican drawings.

Many of his sketches also traffic in graphic images of violent and/or sexual penetration of both human and bovine bodies. Eisenstein repeatedly references the figure of St. Sebastian. One explicitly homoerotic drawing upon which Eisenstein inscribes *St. Sébastien* depicts a toga clad man holding a bow and arrow at the height of his pelvic region. He aims his weapon at the midsection/crotch of another man who stands facing him—tenderly touching his fingertips to the forehead and lower rib cage of his potential penetrator.

This scene is mirrored in another sketch featuring four nude kneeling men with their torsos penetrated by projectiles. Each faceless member of the penetrated quartet collapses forward or sideways in front of a background comprised of seven phallic obelisks jutting into the sky above their heads. This particular drawing can be understood as a rudimentary storyboard for a sequence of the film’s “*Maguey*” episode. Set in the era of the pre-revolutionary *Porfiriato* regime, this chapter

revolves around a hacienda in Tetlapayac. The protagonist, a *campesino* aptly named Sebastián, attempts to avenge the rape of his betrothed Maria by a wealthy landowner. After several scenes of gunplay in which the *campesinos*’ bodies and the surrounding *maguey* are penetrated by bullets, the *hacendado*’s *gaúchos* capture Sebastián and his two collaborators. The subsequent sequence documenting the proto-revolutionaries’ execution graphically matches the preceding episode “*Fiesta*” in which Eisenstein crosscuts between footage of a bullfight and several Catholic religious rituals.

The ceremonies depicted in “*Fiesta*” are the Festival of the *Virgen* and the Stations of the Cross in which three men re-enact the march of Christ and the two thieves Dimas and Gestes to the site of their eventual crucifixion. In place of wooden crosses, the trio substitute saguaro cacti; the needles puncture the flesh of their torsos. Eisenstein mirrors his focus on the musculature of the *Penitentes*’ nude torsos with scenes depicting the choreographed wrapping of *toreador* David Liceaga’s torso in a *faja*. The fetishistic attention to male torsos carries over into the subsequent “*Maguey*” episode. Sebastián’s capturers position their shirtless bound prisoners into a triangular formation mirroring the positioning of the *Penitentes* in “*Fiesta*.” Though the blocking suggests crucifixion, the *gaúchos* bury the co-conspirators up to their necks in desert sand and proceed to trample them to death on horseback. Despite all the attention lavished upon masculine torsos in *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, it is ultimately the figure of the bull rather than St. Sebastian or Christ that symbolizes the sexualized penetration of masculine bodies within Eisenstein’s body of drawings.

The bull featured in the “*Fiesta*” episode of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* functions as a bestial Sebastián substitute since he charges the *toreador*, bearing the embedded lances of multiple *picadors*. Indeed, in a series of

his Mexican drawings, Eisenstein suggests a direct equivalence between the pierced and bleeding torso of Christ on the cross and that of the defeated bull. In this group of images, the filmmaker explores the sexual connotations of (torso) penetration such that Christ and his bovine doppelgängers become effectively envaginated masculine wombs. Three drawings completed while shooting “*Maguey*” feature gruesome sexualized crucifixion scenes. The first, dated early October 1931, exhibits traces of color applied over the outlines of the gray graphite. In this image, a *matador* appears to have somatically fused with his prey. The *toreador* assumes a vertical position reminiscent of Christ on the cross. He hovers above a bull that looks to be crucified upside down on an inverted cross since its head grazes the bottom edge of the paper. The *matador* dramatically throws his arms and cape behind him above his head—a posture suggesting his body is in flight. The palms of his hands bear traces of red pencil connoting stigmata. His cape and sword as well as the outline of the bull’s body are similarly traced with red lines. Close observation demonstrates that what appears to be the edges of the *toreador’s* cape are in fact the bull’s hind hooves. Likewise what seems to be the *matador’s* scarf is in fact the bull’s tail coiled tightly around his neck. The *toreador’s* bare midriff displays the outlines of underlying abdominal muscles. An erect sword complete with bloody hilt floats in front of his pelvis penetrating the bull’s chest. Six rays emanating from the bovine torso form an aura suggesting the possibility of resurrection.

The drawing entitled “*Synthèse Tetlapayac*” represents a kind of coda to Eisenstein’s Mexican adventures since it was drawn shortly after Stalin ordered his return via telegram and Sinclair refused further funding. In this image, the crucified bull’s head is thrown back his throat penetrated by the *matador’s* sword. Upon the horizontal axis of the

crucifix Eisenstein inscribes the word “*Synthèse*.” Since the bull exhibits an erect penis he is clearly male. However, a nude woman emerges from his gaping torso wound. The bull’s female offspring bears tell-tale stigmata shaped to resemble both eyes and vulvas. Like her bovine progenitor, she too bears a bleeding wound on the left side of her thorax. The synthesis to which the inscription refers is likely Eisenstein’s exploration of bisexuality in relation to his perception of a “pre-logical” Mexico as his feminine doppelganger. Not only has he transformed Christ into a martyred bull, his wounded bovine Christ becomes a bi-sexed womb birthing a similarly wounded female Christ.

The combination of bleeding wound and womb evokes the cyclical imagery of death and rebirth salient to the Day of the Dead or *Día de Los Muertos* celebrations Eisenstein shot for the film’s epilogue. Sadly, while Mexico catalyzed a kind of creative rebirth or awakening for Eisenstein, he becomes a kind of Mary-like figure in relation to the film he referred to as his lost child. As with Mary, a punitive father figure takes possession of their progeny. It is perhaps fitting that after involuntarily sacrificing his film footage to Sinclair, Eisenstein also bestowed much of his drawn source material to the guardian of his lost filmic child. Upon his departure from Mexico, Eisenstein sent a trunk packed with his sacrilegious homoerotic drawings to Sinclair—a notorious prude--care of U.S. Customs. With this action, Eisenstein draws a parallel between the fraught sadomasochistic relationship between God the father and his savior son and his own tortured association with his former producer. In bestowing his violent sexual sketches upon Sinclair, Eisenstein evokes the commingled desire and rage the bisexed polymorphously perverse pre-Oedipal infant feels toward his progenitors.



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